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ABSTRACT

Alcohol abuse is a widespread problem on university campuses. A theoretical explanation of alcohol abuse is the Tension Reduction Theory (TRT), which predicts that alcohol reduces tension and that alcohol is consumed because of its tension-reducing effects. This study examined the validity of this theory. College students (N=81) completed the Khavari Alcohol Test and the Trait scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. Results indicated that high anxiety students drank significantly more alcohol than did low anxiety students when a comprehensive measure of alcohol consumption was used. Frequency of alcohol consumpton did not appear to differentiate between high and low anxiety groups. No interaction between gender and anxiety was found; there were no significant interactions on the alcohol use measure. The TRT provides an explanation that seems to work equally well for both genders. The results imply that self-reported anxiety levels may provide a useful screening device to identify problem drinkers. Alcohol education/intervention programs may be designed specifically for these students. (ABL)

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Alcohol and Anxiety: Research and Implications for Prevention and Treatment

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Running Head: ALCOHOL AND ANXIETY

Abstract

A theoretical explanation of alcohol abuse is the Tension Reduction Theory (TRT), which predicts that alcohol reduces tension and is consumed because of its tension-reducing effects (Cappell & Herman, 1972). The implications for prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse relate to the development of programs to identify high anxiety students and implementation of stress management programs. Results indicate that high anxiety students drank significantly more alcohol than low anxiety students. Contrary to hypotheses that the TRT would better explain male drinking patterns, the TRT explanation of the relationship between alcohol and anxiety works equally well for both genders.

Alcohol and Anxiety: Research and Implications for Prevention and Treatment

Alcohol abuse is a widespread problem on university campuses (Engs, 1977; Wechsler & McFadden, 1979). This research was conducted to explore the validity of a theory which relates anxiety and alcohol consumption. Implications for prevention programming and treatment are discussed.

A theoretical explanation of alcohol abuse is the Tension Reduction Theory (TRT), which predicts that alcohol reduces tension and that alcohol is consumed because of its tension-reducing effects (Cappell & Herman, 1972). The implications for prevention and treatment of alcohol abuse in college students relate to the development of programs to identify students who may be at high risk (high anxiety level) and implementing stress management programs in a proactive manner.

It is first necessary to test the validity of the assumptions of the TRT. The research hypotheses tested were (a) students who report a high level of trait anxiety will consume more alcohol than students who report lower levels of anxiety and (b) this effect (high anxiety associated with greater alcohol use) will be stronger for males than females.

Eighty-one college students completed the Khavari Alcohol Test (Khavari & Farber, 1978) and the Trait scale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger et al., 1983). Five two-way

analyses of variance were conducted, using gender and anxiety level as factors. Results indicate that high anxiety students drank significantly more alcohol than low anxiety students when a comprehensive measure of alcohol consumption was used. Frequency of alcohol consumption does not appear to differentiate between high and low anxiety groups.

An unexpected finding was that there was not an interaction between gender and anxiety; there were no significant interactions on the alcohol use measures. It seems as though the TRT provides an explanation for the relationship between alcohol and anxiety that works equally well for both genders. Perhaps, in the past, women may have been responding to social pressure and norms that "women should not get drunk" and, therefore, did not drink excessive amounts of alcohol, even in response to anxiety. It is possible that this sex role stereotyping is changing and women are feeling less restricted by social norms.

The implications of the results of this study for prediction of problem drinking and for the treatment of alcohol abuse are important. Self-reported anxiety levels may provide a useful screening device to identify problem drinkers. Alcohol education/intervention programs may be designed specifically for these students. It seems as though Mascalo's (1979) suggestion to implement stress management as part of alcohol education programs is a good one.

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